

MULTI-AGENCY TEAMS

Why is this relevant?

Multiple, highly skilled, and often highly diverse teams are required to respond to major emergencies (such as the current spread of covid-19). Building cohesive intra- and inter-agency partnerships can equip workers to overcome some of the challenges associated with working in larger multi-agency teams.

Core constructs/concepts

Teams are broadly defined as two or more individuals, each with specified roles, working together to pursue a common goal. Teamwork is the way in which team members interact with one another to coordinate actions and complete tasks.

The ability of a team to work effectively is influenced by factors such as: the size of the team, the skillsets and personalities of team members, leadership style, how well team members communicate with one another, and the level of team cohesion. Teamwork is also influenced by contextual factors, such as time pressure, risk and uncertainty.

Teamwork can be especially challenging when working in highly stressful contexts. Team communication tends to suffer, team members can be less likely to accept support from one another, and individual differences can be exaggerated leading to increased team tensions.

The covid-19 response requires multiple different teams from different organisations and backgrounds working together in what is referred to as a multi-team system. A multi-team system, comprises a network of teams and sub teams, working to achieve separate, but related goals, in the context of over-arching shared system goals.

To tackle the covid-19 outbreak, healthcare professionals from different NHS departments will be working together and alongside the ambulance service, politicians, volunteers, military personnel and administrative staff. Each of these groups will be tasked with their own specific objectives, however they will also share the common goal of delivering essential care to those affected by the virus and ensuring that the NHS is protected. Careful management is needed to ensure these groups are equipped to deliver an effective, coordinated response.



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Practical recommendations

- Make sure to establish effective communication channels between different agencies to ensure that shared awareness can be maintained, especially when teams are geographically dispersed.
- Clearly identify 'Boundary Spanners': staff who can operate between teams and ensure that all teams within the system remain aware of the activities of other teams. In a rapidly evolving crisis, we can expect to see near daily changes to procedural guidelines and advice for safe practice. Inter-agency partners must be kept in the loop.
- Be aware that during periods of intense pressure team members have a tendency to focus on communicating within rather than between agencies. Be mindful of continuing to update inter-agency partners during these periods and avoid agency-specific jargon or acronyms to ensure that communication is clear.
- Be aware of the lack of familiarity amongst colleagues when several different teams and agencies are brought together quickly.
- Look for ways to develop an understanding of the roles, responsibilities and procedural processes of other agencies. Boundary Spanners could be tasked to share information and set up meetings for key individuals from different agencies. This should facilitate opportunities for collaboration and ensure that decisions made by one agency do not compromise the decisions of another.
- Operational staff working on the front line may be remote from their management, and may feel that management lacks understanding of their frontline experiences. To reduce feelings of frustration and stress, leaders and managers should aim to reduce any delays in delivering instructions and updates and demonstrate that they are mindful of the needs and concerns of frontline staff.
- The goals and priorities of different agencies may be in conflict at times during the response to covid-19. This is normal when working within larger multi-team systems as each agency will have different areas of expertise and be tasked with different objectives. At an early stage, team leaders from different groups should be encouraged to work together to identify joint over-arching, strategic goals. This will encourage buy-in from all the agencies, help to develop a shared sense of purpose, and increase the likelihood of having compatible team goals across the system.

Relevant literature

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